ADVENTURES OF DIPU THE DONKEY

VERNON THOMAS

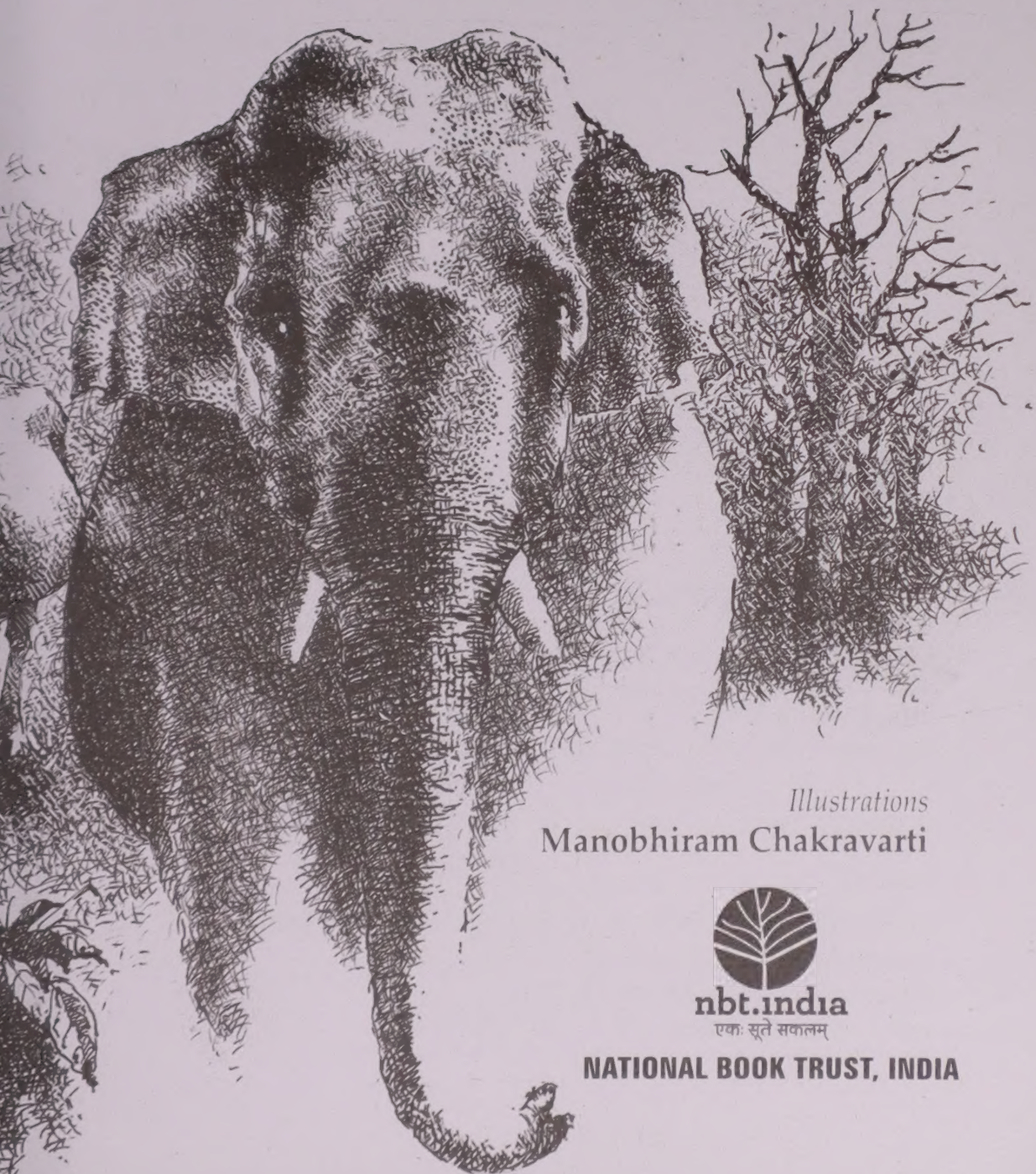
Illustrations
Manobhiram Chakravarti

Nehru Bal Pustakalaya

Adventures of Dipu the Donkey

Vernon Thomas

Based on the TV script by
Rachael Mac Bean



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Manobhiram Chakravarti

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Dipu's Secret Mission

Far, far away, in the heart of a beautiful forest called Sonar Bagan there once lived a little donkey, Dipu. He was quite an ordinary little donkey who loved to eat all day. But, one dark night, not so very long ago, Dipu became famous. And this is how it happened . . .

On that particular night all the birds and animals in Sonar Bagan were fast asleep; Papri, the monkey, was curled up on a branch of her favourite tree; Hari, the grasshopper, was snug in a little patch of tall grass; Payal, the parrot, was dozing in an old peepal tree; Motu, the elephant, snoozed in a muddy patch; Bunty, the rabbit, and Chalu, the fox, were slumbering in their burrows; and Bula, the frog, slept on a large pink lily in the middle of the pond which was his home.

Dipu, of course, was very cosy in his soft bed of hay. He was dreaming as usual of food. And he was just about to help himself to one of the biggest and juiciest carrots he had ever seen, when he suddenly awoke with a start. He looked around and saw some bright flashes of coloured light and heard strange sounds coming from a nearby tree-top. Frightened, he jumped up and exclaimed, "What was that? What are those lights? And what are those sounds?"

He wondered if he was dreaming. He shook his long

ears and swished his tail and looked again. The lights and sounds were real.

He peered harder, and saw . . . the face. It was just a face—no body, no arms, no legs. The face stared down at him from the top branches of the tree while the bright red, blue, green, yellow and orange lights continued to flash.

Dipu had never seen anything like this before. He wanted to flee, but his hooves seemed rooted to the ground.

He was frightened but he could not take his eyes off the face. Suddenly, the face addressed him. "Do not be afraid, Dipu!" it said with a smile. "I have come from outer space. I have come to see you on a secret mission."

"How do you know my name?" asked Dipu surprised.

"I know you very well," replied the face. "I am a messenger from Mr. Halley. Have you heard of Halley's Comet? Do you know what a comet is? A comet is a star with a tail. It travels round the sun like the planets. It is only visible when it comes close to the sun, and forms a long tail of meteor particles and other material. Halley's Comet has been named after the English astronomer, Edmund Halley who discovered it. It is visible from the earth every seventy-six years."

"I've heard of Halley's Comet," said Dipu.

"Mr. Halley wants you to help him," continued the face, or rather the messenger.

"Help him!" echoed Dipu in surprise. "How can I help him? I am only a donkey, after all."

"That doesn't matter," smiled the messenger. "Just tell me, will you help Mr. Halley?"

Dipu was about to protest when he heard sounds behind him. He looked round and found Hari, the grasshopper, and Papri, the monkey, standing there.

"Hari and Papri!" he exclaimed. "How did you get here?"

"We heard voices," said Hari, "so we came to see what was happening."

"Well, this is a messenger from Mr. Halley," said Dipu. "Mr. Halley wants me to help him. But how can I? I am only a donkey, after all."

"I think you are making a terrible mistake," he went on, addressing the messenger once again. "As far as I know, only a human could be clever enough to help Mr. Halley. You should ask a man, not me."

The messenger shook his head. "No, Dipu! Not man—ever. Asking a man to help would be very dangerous. Before I tell you what Mr. Halley wants, you must promise not to tell man about this. Do you promise?"

"All right, I promise!" said Dipu. "Now tell me what I must do."

"Well, it's like this," explained the messenger. "A little while ago Halley's Comet was cruising along at full speed not far from the earth. Suddenly the diamond fell out of its tail. This is not an ordinary diamond. It is the secret of the Comet's power. Without the diamond, Halley's Comet loses its tail. Without a tail it ceases to be a comet. Now, that's serious, as you know."

Dipu nodded. "I suppose without his Comet, Mr. Halley will lose his prestige," he said.

"Yes, indeed," said the messenger. "But that's not all. If the diamond had drifted into outer space, it wouldn't have been so bad. But it has fallen on earth. It has fallen here, somewhere in Sonar Bagan. That's very serious. For if a man finds the diamond, it will make him the most powerful being in the universe. If used unwisely such power could not only destroy the earth but the universe as well. Knowing men as we do, we cannot afford to take

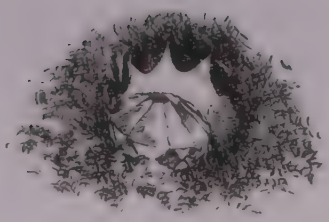
that risk. Now I think you understand why man must never find the diamond. That's why Mr. Halley has chosen you for this mission."

"In that case, I will find the diamond for you," said Dipu. "I'll begin searching for it right away."

"Very good!" said the messenger smiling. "Mr. Halley will be pleased. But, remember, you must find the diamond and return it before the sun rises. If you don't, Halley's Comet will lose its tail. It will cease to be a comet."

"Yes! Yes! I understand," said Dipu quickly. "I'll start searching right away. I'll ask all my friends to help me."

"Yes! Do that!" the messenger said. With that the flashing coloured lights began to get dimmer and he disappeared from sight.



The Friends Get to Work

As darkness descended on Sonar Bagan once again, Dipu, Hari and Papri looked at each other amazed. "It seems like a dream," remarked Dipu. "Are you sure it really happened?"

"Indeed it did," said Papri. "I saw it myself."

"So did I," said Hari. "Though it's as hard to believe as a grasshopper with a donkey's tail. But I'll help you, Dipu! I know every blade of grass in Sonar Bagan. If the diamond is somewhere in the grass, I'm sure to find it."

"If it's anywhere in the trees, be sure *I'll* find it," put in Papri. "I know every branch around this place."

"That's very kind of both of you," Dipu said gratefully. "Still, I think we should wake up some of the others and ask them to help, too. We'll ask Payal, the parrot, Motu, the elephant, and Bunty, the rabbit, as well."

"What about Chalu, the fox?" asked Papri.

Dipu shook his head. "I think we should leave Chalu out of this. You know, he's not very friendly with any of us. He might tell the secret to man. Not that man ever visits this wood. Still, one can't be too sure."

"Yes, I think leaving Chalu out of this is a good idea," said Hari. "But what about Bula, the frog? Shouldn't we ask him to help?"

"We certainly can," said Dipu. "But you know Bula.

He's such a sleepy-head. We'll have to shout and shout in order to wake him up. And that's a great risk, you'll agree. You know how close Bula's pond is to Chalu's den. If Chalu hears us calling, he'll surely come prying. And we don't want that, do we?"

"No, we don't," said Papri firmly. "In the circumstances, we'd better leave Bula out."

As that settled the matter, the three friends went immediately and woke Payal, Motu and Bunty. When the three heard what was required, they agreed to help at once.

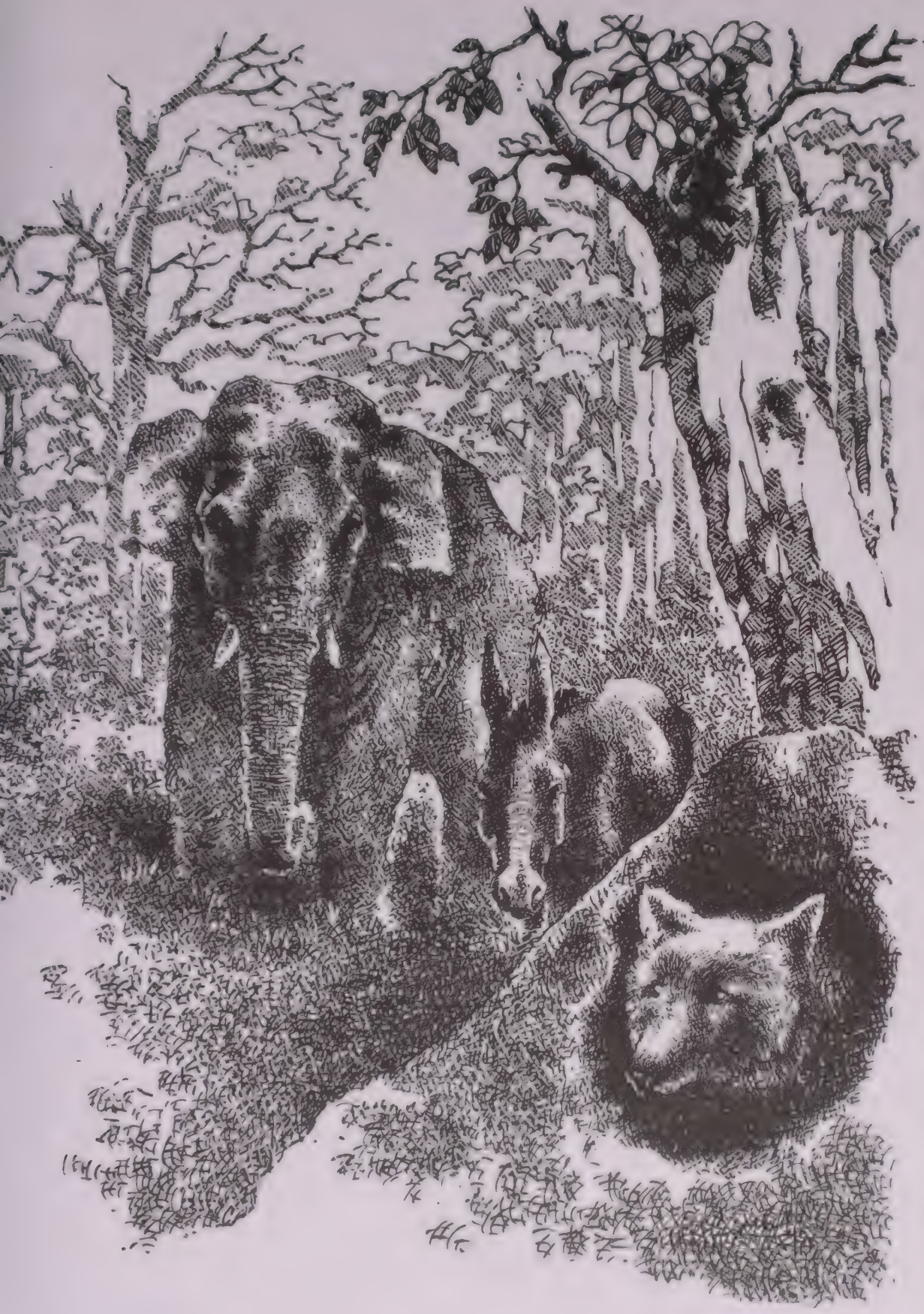
The six decided to set off in different directions to look for the diamond. Hari and Bunty began to turn over every blade of grass, Payal and Papri peered into the branches of every tree, while Dipu and Motu trudged through every inch of the wood, keeping their eyes glued to the ground.

During their search Dipu and Motu happened to pass close by Chalu's den. Chalu was a light sleeper, and Motu's heavy tread woke him up. Chalu immediately came out.

Looking around he spotted Dipu and Motu. He wondered what they were up to. Then he saw Payal and Papri in a tree close by. That made him more suspicious. Chalu decided to find out what was going on.

Tiptoeing past Bula's pond he suddenly noticed a bright golden light coming from the pond. Curious, he went to the edge and took a closer look. To his amazement he found the whole pond lit up—from the bottom to the surface of the water. Everything in the pond was clearly visible—every fish swimming about, every stone at the bottom of the pond, every lily, right down to its roots.

Chalu could hardly believe his eyes. He wondered where the light came from. And then he suddenly spotted it. In a corner of the pond, at the very bottom, lay a stone,



which gave out bright golden rays of light.

"I wonder what kind of magic stone that is!" thought Chalu, as he crept away. He continued to wonder, and he continued to try and find out what the others were up to.

Chalu had just gone when, Bula, resting on his pink lily bed, awoke with a start. He looked around sleepily and suddenly noticed the bright golden light filling the pond.

"Where is this light coming from?" he asked himself, as he peeped over the edge of the pink lily into the water. Then he noticed the brightly lit stone lying in a corner at the bottom of the pond. Curious he dived into the water and swam to the bottom. Moving close to the stone, he stared at it for a moment. Deciding that it was not harmful, he picked it up and returned with it to his pink lily. He tucked away the stone between some petals, and curled up again to sleep.

"I don't know what it is. But it's very pretty, and I'll keep it," he said to himself, before dropping off to sleep.

Chalu Strikes a Bargain

Meanwhile the six friends were searching for the diamond. After some time they met under an old mango tree to compare notes on how they had fared.

"Though we turned over every blade of grass, we couldn't find the diamond," announced Hari and Bunty sadly.

"Though we peered into the branches of every tree in this wood, we weren't able to find it either," said Papri and Payal. "What about Dipu and Motu?"

Dipu and Motu shook their heads sadly. "We too looked everywhere, but we couldn't find the diamond," said Motu.

"But the diamond must be somewhere," insisted Dipu. "Mr. Halley's messenger said it fell in Sonar Bagan, and he can't be wrong."

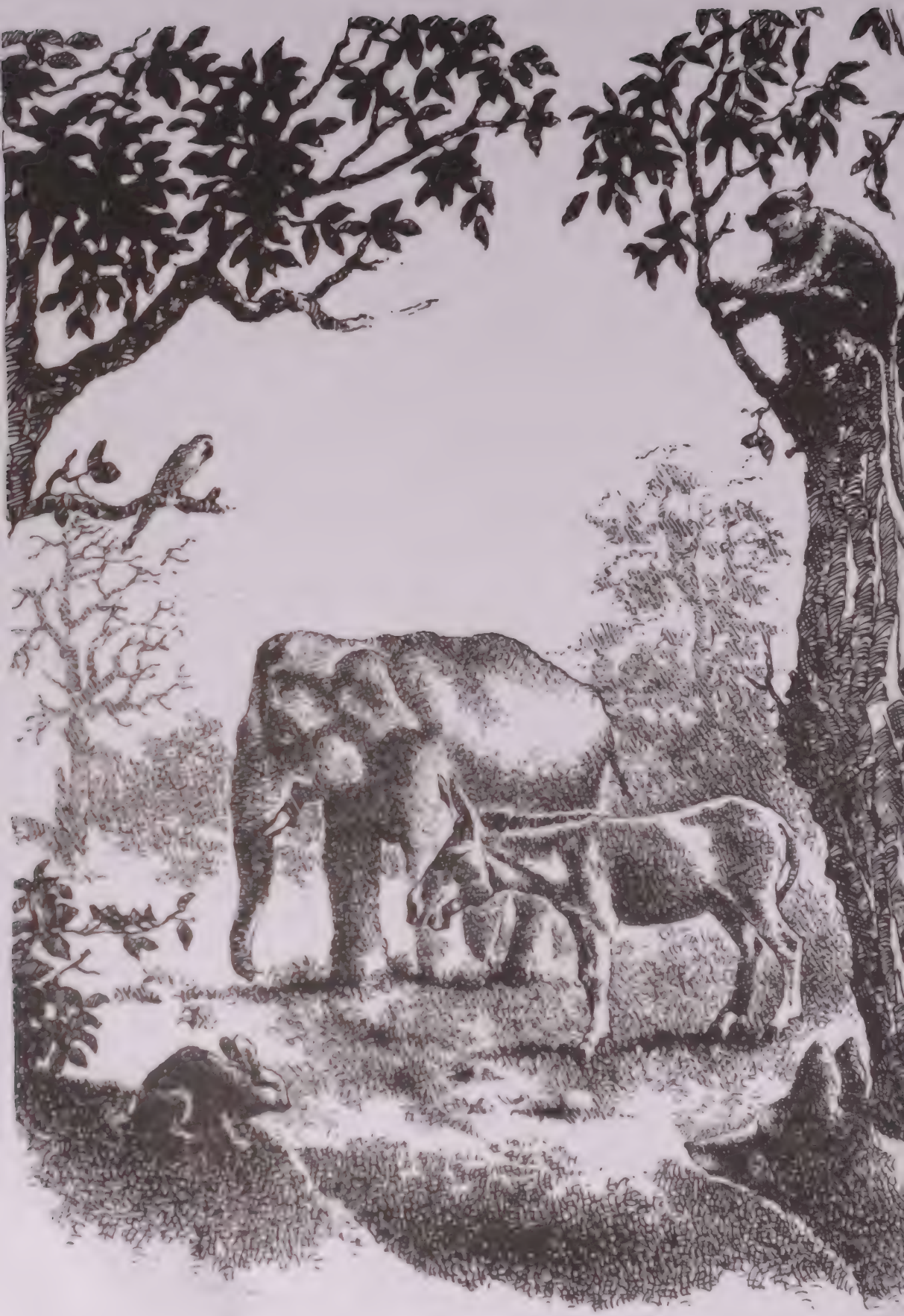
"Then where is it?" cried Papri.

"What did you say?" interrupted a voice—and the six friends turned to find Chalu behind them, eyeing them suspiciously.

"What are you doing here, Chalu?" asked Dipu. "We thought you were asleep."

"Well, you should be asleep at this time, too," pointed out Chalu slyly. "How come you're awake?"

The six were silent. They did not know what to say.



Then Dipu whispered to his friends, "Since the matter is so urgent, do you think we should tell him? Perhaps he can help."

While the others were hesitating, Dipu took the matter into his own hands. He decided to take a chance and trust Chalu.

"Well, you see, Chalu," he said, "we are searching for a diamond. This diamond fell out of Halley's Comet, right here in Sonar Bagan. Mr. Halley has given me the task of finding it. I must do so before sunrise or else Halley's Comet will lose its tail, and the Comet will cease to be a comet. It's a very serious matter, you understand."

At that, a cunning light crept into Chalu's eyes. He was not interested in the importance of the diamond, but he could guess where it would be found. Bula's pond! That glowing stone at the bottom of the pond must be the diamond. Only a diamond could cause those golden rays of light.

"I know where the diamond is," he announced. "I can tell you where it's to be found."

"Can you really, Chalu?" Dipu asked eagerly.

"I can! Oh, I can!" said Chalu slyly. "But what will you give me in return?"

"We'll give you anything you want, Chalu," promised Dipu rashly.

"Anything! Then, let me think!" said Chalu. He looked round the group trying to make up his mind when his eyes fell on Bunty. "Rabbit stew wouldn't be a bad idea," he thought. He was tired of eating fruit and vegetables. It was against the laws of Sonar Bagan to eat animals or birds. Rabbit stew would make a nice change.

"I'll tell you where the diamond is," he announced, "on the condition that Bunty will have breakfast with me tomorrow morning."

"Is that your only condition?" asked Dipu. "Why, Bunty will certainly have breakfast with you tomorrow morning. Now tell us where the diamond is."

"I will," promised Chalu. "Meet me in five minutes at Bula's pond," and off he went.

"What have you done, Dipu?" said Bunty, trembling. "Don't you realize that asking me to have breakfast with him is just a trick of Chalu's to eat me for breakfast?"

"Oh dear, how foolish of me!" cried Dipu with regret. "I never thought of that . . . . Still, it's our only hope of finding the diamond."

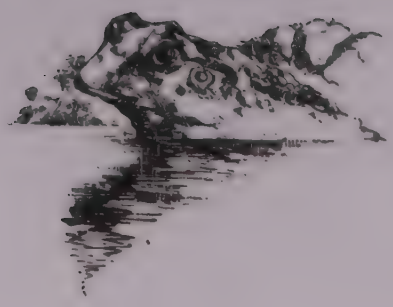
"Our only hope!" exclaimed Papri, shocked by Dipu's remark. "Think of what will happen to poor Bunty."

"Yes, Bunty's life is in grave danger," said Hari seriously. "We surely can't agree to anything that would mean his death."

Meanwhile, Bunty was very quiet, lost in thought. Suddenly, he spoke, "All right, I agree," he announced. "I'll accept Chalu's invitation."

"You can't!" protested Papri and Hari together.

But Bunty had made up his mind. "I agree!" he insisted bravely. "After all, it means finding Mr. Halley's diamond. We can't let him down. I will face Chalu when the time comes. I'll see what I can do to save myself. . . . In any case, we haven't a moment to lose. Quick! Let's go to Bula's pond."



Chalu is Outwitted

When they got to the pond, however, they found Chalu in a tearing rage. He was stamping his feet in anger and shouting at Bula. "You rogue! Give me back the diamond. I know you've got it. It's mine. I saw it first."

But Bula pretended to know nothing about the matter. "What are you talking about?" he asked innocently. "What diamond? I have seen no diamond."

"Of course you have," insisted Chalu. "When I passed this way a short while back, the entire pond was lit up by a golden light. At the bottom, in a corner, lay the diamond, which glowed like a bright light. Now I find the glow has gone, and so has the diamond. Only one person could have taken it, and that's you, Bula. Give it to me. It's my diamond. I saw it first."

"Yes, Bula," said Dipu, "if you have the diamond please give it to us. It belongs to Mr. Halley. It fell out of Halley's Comet, right here into Sonar Bagan. If the diamond isn't returned, the Comet will lose its tail. It will cease to be a comet. Come on, Bula, be a friend."

Having heard the full story, Bula decided to tell the truth. "All right, Dipu," he answered, "I have the diamond, if that's what you call it. But since this is my pond, it is rightly mine, you know."

"No, it isn't!" argued Chalu. "It's mine. I saw it first."

"It belongs to neither of you," Dipu pointed out. "It belongs to Mr. Halley, and must be returned at once. Come now, Bula, hand over the diamond. We haven't much time. It must be returned before the sun rises. Do hurry!"

Bula agreed to hand over the diamond. He took it out from among the petals of the lily and, jumping off his bed, made his way to the bank. "Here you are!" he said rather gruffly, handing over the diamond to Dipu. "I'm returning this diamond because you say it's important. But it really should be mine, since I found it. Moreover, this is my pond, and I was looking forward to giving it as a present to my wife."

There was great rejoicing among the six friends now that the diamond was found.

"We must now wait for Mr. Halley's messenger, and hand the diamond over to him," said Dipu.

"Yes, we must. Mr. Halley will surely be pleased," said Papri and Hari, Motu and Payal together. Only Bunty was silent. He was watching Chalu, who stood close by, a cunning smile on his face.

"Yes, you must give Mr. Halley his diamond," said Chalu at this point. "But don't forget your bargain with me, Dipu! Bunty must have breakfast with me tomorrow morning."

"Oh dear, I almost forgot about that!" said Dipu with a small start. And, indeed, in the excitement of having found the diamond, Bunty and his fate had slipped Dipu's mind.

"Dear me!" Dipu now thought in despair. "What can I do to save poor Bunty?" And then an idea struck him and he clutched the diamond tightly. "Oh magic diamond of Mr. Halley!" Dipu whispered in silent prayer. "Please help us. Please save Bunty from being eaten by Chalu."

Dipu had hardly finished uttering these words, when suddenly as if in answer to his prayer, Bunty began to

grow. With each passing moment he grew bigger and bigger until finally he was almost the same size as Motu.

They all stared at Bunty in amazement. Only Dipu knew the truth, and he was very grateful.

Chalu was alarmed and frightened. Seeing Bunty grow so enormous, he feared that Bunty would now eat him, instead of his eating Bunty.

"Dipu! Dipu, my friend!" he said hastily. "I've changed my mind. I don't want Bunty to have breakfast with me. Our bargain is off. Do you understand?"

"I do!" said Dipu in great relief, and the others broke into wild cheers. Even Bunty cheered. Then to everyone's astonishment, Bunty slowly began to grow small again. Smaller and smaller he grew until, at last he was back to his normal size.

Now, of course, Chalu would have liked to eat him for breakfast but this wasn't possible, since the deal was off. And as no one in Sonar Bagan went back on his word, Chalu realized, sadly, that he would have to continue to live on fruit and vegetables, and give up all thought of a mouth-watering rabbit stew. Chalu quietly retreated sulking to his den.

"Good riddance!" said Dipu, and he told the others what he had done to save Bunty.

Mission Complete

Dipu had hardly finished his story when, suddenly, bright coloured lights began to flash in the trees above.

"It's Mr. Halley's messenger come to fetch the diamond," announced Dipu excitedly, as all attention turned to the branches overhead.

Everyone expected to see the face of the messenger, but to their amazement the complete form of a man stood there. He wore a green suit, and had a red cloak over his shoulders. On his head he had a big silver cube that beeped and buzzed, and made other strange sounds. His eyes were round and very blue, and his cheeks sparkled with stardust. On his fingers he wore several glittering diamond rings.

"Greetings, friends!" he said. "I am Mr. Halley."

"Mr. Halley! How wonderful to see you!" cried Dipu. "Welcome to Sonar Bagan."

"Thank you," said Mr. Halley, bowing. "Have you found my diamond?"

"Indeed we have, Sir!" answered Dipu proudly, and he handed over the diamond.

Mr. Halley was delighted. "Dipu, I must thank you and your friends for finding the diamond," he said gratefully. "You have done me a great service. I have a

special gift for you in return for your kindness."

As he spoke, a bright light began to shine from far above. Slowly, it came closer, growing brighter every minute. Then, as the friends watched, they saw a small star come down in their midst. It came and settled at Dipu's feet.

"A star! How lovely! Thank you, Sir!" cried Dipu, as he bent to pick up the gift.

"Yes, that's the star of love," explained Mr. Halley. "It's my special gift to you. Keep the star with you and let love grow. Only love can make your world live happily. Look after it carefully, Dipu! It will be of great use to you."

"Thank you again, Mr. Halley," said Dipu. "From now on I will wear this star on a chain round my neck. I will . . ."

He broke off in mid sentence as he realized that Mr. Halley had disappeared—and along with him, the bright lights. Sonar Bagan was dark once more. Not really dark, for the first rays of dawn were creeping through the tree-tops.

The friends were silent. They looked around in wonder. "Do you think we've been dreaming?" asked Papri doubtfully.

"Perhaps we have," said Hari, blinking his eyes. But Dipu looked at the star and shook his head. "No, it all really happened," he said. "We must do as Mr. Halley said. We must let love grow. And the first person I think we should show love to is Chalu."

"Chalu!" screeched Payal. "Who can love Chalu?"

"Yes, who can?" asked Motu. "Chalu is sly and cunning." Papri, Hari and Bunty agreed.

Dipu shook his head again. "I think Chalu is like that because none of us loves him," he stated. "We must try to make friends with Chalu. Perhaps he will change with our love. Come on, let's try! I am sure this is what

Mr. Halley would want."

"Well, I suppose so," said Bunty.

"In that case," said Dipu, "I suggest we go and meet Chalu and ask him to be our friend." The others agreed and the friends set off in a body for Chalu's den.

Chalu was still sulking and was rather surprised to see them. He was even more surprised at their offer of friendship.

"Do you mean to say you want to be friends with me, after all that I've done?" he asked, sounding somewhat ashamed.

"Yes, we do want to be your friends," insisted Dipu. "And we make no conditions. Do you agree?"

"All right," said Chalu, still rather puzzled.

From that moment he became their friend and in time he changed. He gave up his sly and cunning ways.

As for Dipu, he too changed after the incident of the diamond. Not only did he become famous in Sonar Bagan, but for him life was never quite the same again from then on, as will be seen from what follows.

In Search of Adventure

It was a bright sunny morning. The sky above Sonar Bagan was mostly very blue, but a few fluffy white clouds floated in it. The leaves on the trees were fresh and green and the trees were laden with fruit. Birds sang merrily in the branches. On the ground the grass grew tall, and there were flowers everywhere.

It was the sort of day that would lift anyone's spirits. But while everyone else seemed happy, Dipu was sad and gloomy.

"What a lovely morning!" sang out Papri, as she swung down from a branch to join Dipu where he sat. "Isn't it a lovely day for a picnic? What do you think?"

Dipu did not answer. He grunted and stared ahead moodily.

"What's the matter, Dipu?" asked Papri. "Is something bothering you? You look so sad and gloomy."

"I feel sad and gloomy," admitted Dipu slowly.

"Why?" asked Papri. "What is wrong?"

"Nothing really," shrugged Dipu. "I just feel sad and gloomy."

"But why?" insisted Papri. "No one in Sonar Bagan should feel like this. Besides, how can you be sad on such a lovely day?"

"I don't know," said Dipu. "I suppose I'm just bored,

with nothing to do."

"Nothing to do!" echoed Papri. "But there's so much we can do. We can go on a picnic today."

But Dipu shook his head. "I'm fed up of picnics," he said. "I'm fed up of everything in Sonar Bagan. Nothing exciting happens any more."

"I think I know what's wrong with you," said Papri. "I've noticed you haven't been the same since you found Mr. Halley's diamond. I suppose you want to have more adventures. But such things happen only once in a lifetime."

"I suppose you're right," said Dipu thoughtfully. "You know, lately I've been wondering what lies beyond Sonar Bagan. I've been wondering about those lights that twinkle in those distant hills. Do you know what's there?"

"Yes, beyond Sonar Bagan there is the great wide world," explained Papri. "Those hills and those twinkling lights are where man lives."

"The great, wide world where man lives!" echoed Dipu, and his eyes began to shine. "That sounds so exciting! It would be lovely to visit the great wide world, and wonderful to meet man. I'm sure that's why I'm sad. I need adventure, and here I am stuck in Sonar Bagan."

"My dear friend, we are best off in Sonar Bagan," said Papri seriously. "This is our home, and we should stay here. It would be foolish to venture outside."

"Why foolish?" Dipu asked. "What harm is there in going out into the world? What harm is there in meeting man?"

"Plenty of harm!" cried Papri, shocked. "The great wide world is an awful place. It's full of problems. Problems which man has created. You and I are best off where we are."

"How would you know?" Dipu asked. "You've never visited the great wide world. You've never come in contact with man."

"That's true," Papri agreed. "But many of my brothers and sisters have been there. We monkeys know man well. That's why we try to keep far from him. Besides, remember what Mr. Halley's messenger said. Mr. Halley wouldn't entrust his diamond to man."

"Yes! Yes! I know that," said Dipu curtly. "But I still don't think you can afford to talk. I seem to remember having heard Dr. Owl say that man is connected with you in some way. . . . Yes, that's it! Man is descended from your noble race, Dr. Owl told me."

"That's not true," said Papri angrily. "I can tell you there are many differences between man and us."

"Well, go on, tell me!" said Dipu. "I'm listening."

"Well, since you're interested, I'll tell you," said Papri, still very angry. "The differences are best explained in a song which we monkeys sing. It goes like this:

Its quite untrue, an utter disgrace
To say that humans came from our noble race
Man does so much that monkeys abhor
Planning, scheming and going to war.
Man's not like us, he's just a brute
He chatters a lot, but we speak the truth."

Dipu was shocked. "Papri, you don't mean to say that man is so bad?" he cried.

Papri was about to answer, when Payal flew in.

"Dipu! Papri!" she said excitedly. "I have news. I just saw a man in Sonar Bagan!"

"A man?" exclaimed Papri, worried. "Now that's bad news. I don't like it. Wherever man goes he brings trouble."

"Trouble!" repeated Payal. "Are you saying that *all* men are bad?"

"Indeed they are," said Papri firmly. "But a man in the forest means trees being cut. I suppose the man you've seen is a woodcutter. He's come to ruin our beautiful

Sonar Bagan. He'll cut down all our trees."

"Well, he's certainly cutting a tree," said Payal, "but it's a dead tree. What use is a dead tree to us?"

"Of no use, I agree," said Papri grudgingly. "Still, he's come to make trouble, I'm sure. All men are bad."

"I'm sorry, I don't agree with you," said Payal. "Some men are good. I know that from my own experience. I don't think I've told you that I once belonged to a man. No one could have been kinder. Though he kept me in a cage, he looked after me very well. He gave me the most delicious things to eat. He was affectionate and gentle. I was very happy with him. But, alas, he died! Since his equally kind wife could not look after me, she set me free. I flew to Sonar Bagan, and I've been here ever since. . . . No, I think you are wrong to say all men are bad. Some surely are. But there are also good men, out there in the great wide world."

Dipu had been listening quietly to this conversation. He was very excited about the arrival of a human being in Sonar Bagan. Though upset by what Papri had said, his faith in man had been greatly restored by Payal's words.

"There you are, Papri!" he spoke up at this point. "I think you're wrong about man. You speak from hearsay, but Payal speaks from experience."

"Payal was lucky to come across a good man," answered Papri. "I still say, most men are bad."

"A little while ago you said all men are bad," pointed out Dipu. "Now you're saying most are bad. I really don't know what to think. I think I should find out for myself. . . . Payal, take me to where the man is! I want to see what he looks like."

Before Payal could speak Papri interrupted, "You already know what a man looks like. You've seen Mr. Halley."

"Yes I have," agreed Dipu. "But Mr. Halley belongs to another world. I want to see what a man of this world looks like. If need be, I'll make friends with this woodcutter."

"For goodness sake, Dipu!" cried Papri in alarm. "You don't realize what you're saying. You'll land yourself in trouble. Take my advice, keep away . . . . Payal, you're to blame for this! Because of your silly talk, Dipu will get into trouble."

"What did I say?" cried Payal. "I only spoke of my own experience. I only spoke the truth."

"The truth!" said Papri scornfully, near tears. "It's because of your silly truth that Dipu will get into trouble."

"I think Dipu can look after himself," Payal said wisely. "He's old enough to know what he wants to do. If he wants to meet man, I don't think we should stop him. Let him find out for himself. For, as they say, experience is the best teacher."

"Yes, Papri, you mustn't worry about me," said Dipu, moved to see his friend in tears. "I can look after myself. As long as I feel I need adventure, I won't be happy in Sonar Bagan. Let me go and meet man! Let me see for myself what the great wide world is like. I can then decide my future."

That ended the matter. Dipu wished Papri goodbye and, accompanied by Payal, set off for the place where the man was chopping wood.

Dipu Finds a Friend

They soon reached the place where the woodcutter was cutting up the trunk of a dead tree into logs. The woodcutter was so engrossed in what he was doing, that he did not notice Dipu and Payal watching him from behind some trees.

After a while, Payal said she must go and attend to important matters. Wishing Dipu good luck, she flew off. Dipu was so intent on looking at the first man of this earth he'd seen that he forgot to wish Payal goodbye.

The woodcutter was short and stout, with a kind face. He wore a vest and dhoti, and had a piece of cloth wound round his head as a turban. But Dipu did not notice these details. He was only interested in seeing how different this man—though similar in form to Mr. Halley—was from the animals and birds in Sonar Bagan. Why, in spite of what Dr. Owl had said, man was not really like Papri and her race. Dipu was so deep in thought, that he did not realize that he was slowly drawing closer and closer to where the man was working.

The woodcutter meanwhile chopped and chopped, and the pile of wood beside him grew larger and larger.

"Dear me!" said the woodcutter to himself, as he looked at the pile. "I've been lucky to find a dead tree today. If only I was so lucky every day, my wife, Sukhi,

and I would have enough to live comfortably, but. . ." Then glancing at the pile again he said, "I wish I had a little donkey to carry all this wood. It will be difficult to carry this heavy load home on my head."

He sighed, glanced up and spotted Dipu standing right in front of him.

"Why!" exclaimed the woodcutter. "There was I wishing I had a little donkey to carry this wood and here's one right in front of me! But, what a strange donkey! He has a silver star on a chain round his neck."

He came up to Dipu and asked gently, "Little donkey, what's your name?"

"Dipu," answered Dipu shyly, pleased that a man should speak to him. "And what's your name?"

"My name is Mangal," answered the woodcutter. "Pleased to meet you, Dipu! Tell me, why do you wear that lovely star round your neck?"

"This is the star of love," Dipu explained. "It was given to me by Mr. Halley, as a gift for finding his precious diamond. The diamond fell out of Halley's Comet, you know. If it hadn't been found, the Comet would have lost its tail. That would have been very serious. Mr. Halley asked me to find the diamond."

"I see! I see! How interesting!" said Mangal, rather puzzled, for he had never heard of Mr. Halley, or Halley's Comet for that matter. "Dipu," he went on, "I need your help. Will you carry this wood for me, to my village please? It's quite far away but I'm sure you'll manage."

"I'll certainly carry your wood," said Dipu. "But, tell me, is your village there, beyond the hills?"

"Yes, it is!" nodded Mangal.

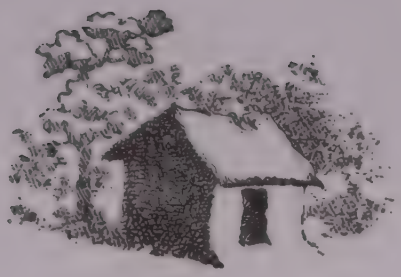
"That's where the great, wide world is," said Dipu eagerly. "That's where I want to go. I want to go where man lives."

"Well, I'll take you there," said Mangal, laughing. "There are many people in my village. It's part of the great wide world, all right."

"That's lovely!" cried Dipu. "Then we'll be friends. Can I live with you?"

"Of course," agreed Mangal, delighted that he would have a donkey to carry his wood.

He loaded the pile of logs onto Dipu's back, tied a rope around Dipu's neck, and lead him out of Sonar Bagan, into the great wide world.



Dipu's New Home

Sonar Bagan was soon left far behind and Dipu and Mangal crossed a wide stretch of grassland with no trees to give shade. It was hot and Dipu began to feel sweaty and thirsty.

"Mangal, I could do with a drink of water," he said at last.

"I could do with one myself," answered Mangal and led the way to a nearby stream, where they both quenched their thirst.

Feeling much better they continued on their journey and reached a hill. The hill was quite steep and as they climbed higher and higher Dipu began to get out of breath, and the load on his back felt heavy. Mangal noticed that he looked uncomfortable.

"Don't worry, Dipu, we'll soon be over the top," he said comfortingly. "It will be easier going down the other side. My village is at the bottom of the hill in the valley below. We'll soon be home."

They reached the top of the hill. Going down the other side was easier, and they moved faster. At last, they reached the valley where Mangal's village was.

Dipu was thrilled to see the cluster of mud houses with thatched roofs. So this was the world of man, he thought excitedly, as he noticed many men like Mangal moving about.

The sun was setting when they finally stopped in front of a little house. Like the other houses, it too was made of mud, and had a thatched roof. It had a small garden in front, in which many kinds of vegetables were growing. Dipu's mouth watered at the sight and his stomach growled with hunger. He wanted to ask for something to eat, but thought it would be impolite.

Mangal knocked at the front door, and someone opened it—someone belonging to the race of man, but dressed differently from Mangal.

"This is my wife, Sukhi," Mangal said to Dipu and introducing Dipu to his wife said, "Sukhi, meet my friend, Dipu! We met in the forest today when I was cutting wood. I was praying for a little donkey to carry my wood, and there suddenly was Dipu standing in front of me. We became friends at once and Dipu agreed to come and live with us. Now we have our own little donkey to carry the wood. Isn't that wonderful!"

"That's really wonderful!" cried Sukhi. "Welcome to our home, Dipu!" Throwing her arms around Dipu's neck, she gave him a kiss on the forehead.

Dipu blushed at being kissed. But he liked it. He liked Sukhi, too. He liked her pretty face, her nice long blue skirt, pink blouse, and the white cloth thrown over her head and shoulders. He liked the necklace of bright beads she wore round her neck and the many colourful bangles on her wrists.

Mangal removed the load of wood from Dipu's back and led him to a little shed in a corner of the garden. Here there was a bed of fresh hay, a pile of juicy carrots, and a bucket of clear sparkling water.

"Come, Dipu!" said Mangal. "You must be tired. It's time for your dinner. Then you must sleep. We have a busy day tomorrow. We have to go to the village fair.

I must sell my wood so that I can buy food for all of us."

He wished Dipu goodnight and went out, closing the door after him. Dipu immediately went and feasted on the juicy carrots. After he had had his fill, he drank the water. He then lay down contentedly on his comfortable bed of hay. He was happy that he had found kind friends from the human race, and thought he was lucky, as lucky as Payal had been, when she had had a home with man.

"I guess Papri was wrong," Dipu thought, as he dropped off to sleep. "Papri should see me now. I wonder what she'd say. In fact, I wonder what she's doing at the moment. And Payal and the others in Sonar Bagan."

He was soon fast asleep, dreaming of his new life, his new friends, and how wonderful it would be at the village fair the next day.

The Village Fair

The sun was streaming through the window of his little shed when Dipu awoke the next morning. He jumped up and blinked, wondering where he was. At first he thought he was in Sonar Bagan. Then he remembered. He was out in the great wide world, living with man. He was thrilled at the thought.

Soon Mangal came into the shed. He brought fresh juicy carrots, and another bucket of water.

"Good morning, Dipu!" he said brightly. "Time for your breakfast. After that we must set off for the village fair. We have a busy day ahead of us."

Dipu ate the carrots and drank the water. Mangal then led him out of the shed and loaded the wood onto his back. Mangal tied a rope around Dipu's neck, and got ready to leave. Just then Sukhi arrived and, handing Mangal a container of food said, "That's your lunch. There are some carrots, for Dipu too."

Soon they were on their way to the village square, where the fair was being held. Dipu was very excited. He could hardly wait to get there.

On the way they passed a grand stone house with a high wall running round it. At the gate stood two uniformed guards, with bows and arrows slung across their backs.

"Whose house is that?" asked Dipu. "And who are these men at the gate?"

"That's the landlord's house," explained Mangal. "He is the richest man here. He owns most of the village. These men are his guards. They protect his house. No one is allowed to enter. If anyone tries, the guards will shoot him dead with their bows and arrows."

"How terrible!" cried Dipu shocked, remembering Papri's words about men killing each other. "What's the use of having such a beautiful house, if no one is allowed to enter it? The landlord must be a horrible man."

"He's not so bad," said Mangal, laughing, amused to see Dipu so shocked. "The landlord is really quite kind. His daughter is the wicked one. She's spoilt and selfish, and very cruel. Everyone is afraid of her. Her name is Sundari, but we call her Princess, because she puts on such airs. Everyone tries to keep their distance from her, for there is no knowing what harm she will do."

"Oh, I hope I never meet her!" cried Dipu alarmed. "She must be a very bad person."

"She is indeed bad," said Mangal. "But come cheer up, Dipu! We're at the village fair."

* * * *

The village fair was crowded. There were hordes of people, and lots of lovely things for sale. There were vegetables and fruit, rice and spices, cooking pots and other utensils. There were beautiful coloured bangles and ribbons, earrings and necklaces—and a lot, lot more.

Dipu looked around with great interest. The vendors were doing brisk business.

Mangal took his place among the sellers. He removed the load of wood from Dipu's back, and piled it up on the ground in front of him. Within minutes several people

were haggling over the price of the wood and in a short time all Mangal's wood was sold. Mangal was very pleased.

"Now, we'll be able to buy the things we need, Dipu," he said, and off they went. They bought rice and spices, a cooking pot, and a red ribbon for Sukhi's hair. But Mangal still had some money left. "I've been very lucky today, Dipu," said Mangal happily. "I'm sure my good luck is due to you, my friend. How can I thank you enough?"

"Don't mention it," said Dipu shyly. "I am grateful to. . . "

He broke off for, at that moment, he spotted a man with a bamboo pole slung across his shoulders, from which hung wire cages full of birds. The cages were overcrowded, the birds were struggling to get out and screaming in terror.

"What on earth is that man doing?" cried Dipu. "Those birds will surely die. They have no place to move, and they can hardly breathe."

"That man is a bird-seller," explained Mangal. "He sells birds to people to take home. There they are kept in wire cages."

"Kept in wire cages!" cried Dipu, very upset. "But birds aren't meant to be kept in cages. They should be free to fly about. I wish I had some money! I would buy all those birds and set them free." He could hardly hold back a sob of unhappiness when he said this.

"Now, Dipu!" said Mangal kindly. "Don't be upset, please. I have some money left. If you want to free those birds, I'll buy them for you."

"Will you, Mangal? Will you really do that?" cried Dipu, brightening up immediately. "You *are* kind. Perhaps the kindest man in the world!"

"Come! Come!" said Mangal, pleased. "I am sure there

are kinder people than I. But, as I said, I'll buy those birds for you." He promptly called the bird-seller and asked him how much he wanted for all the birds.

"All the birds?" cried the surprised man. He named his price, and Mangal agreed to it. He paid the bird-seller, and handed the cages to Dipu who, to the amazement of the onlookers, opened the cages and set the birds free.

The birds flew off twittering with delight. Only one bird stayed back to say 'thank you'. She was a little purple sunbird. She perched on Dipu's head and whispered into his ear, "Friend, my name is Kular. I cannot thank you enough. I'll never forget your great kindness. If you're ever in trouble, I'll come and help you." And then off she flew.

Dipu in Trouble

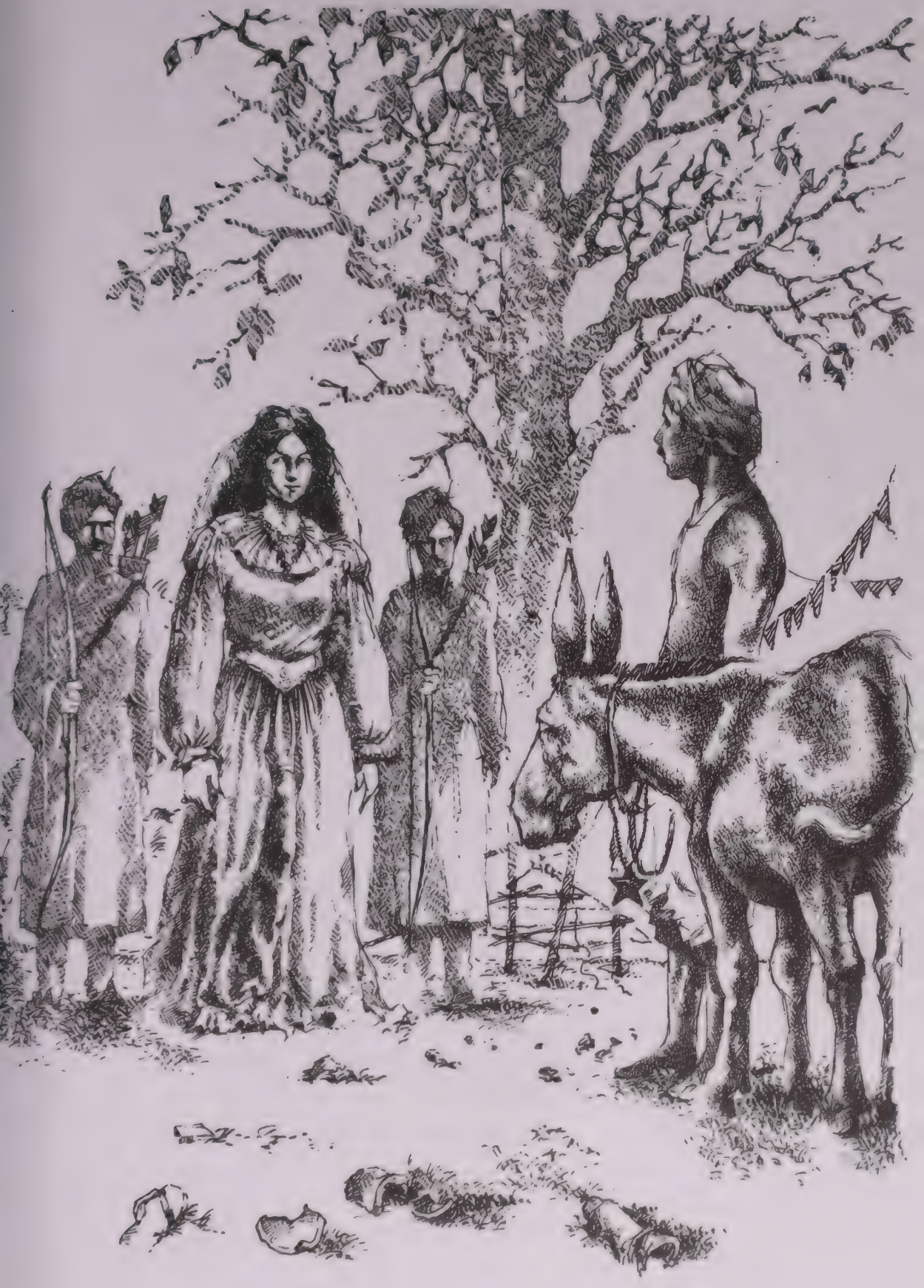
Dipu was very happy that he had done the birds a good turn. He was just about to tell Mangal how grateful he was to him when there were shouts from all sides. "Run! Run! The Princess is coming! The Princess is coming!" People immediately scattered in all directions.

"The Princess! Come, Dipu, we must be off!" whispered Mangal urgently, as he urged Dipu forward. But Dipu was slow in moving. Soon the square was deserted, and only Dipu and Mangal were left.

The Princess appeared followed by two guards armed with bows and arrows.

As the Princess drew closer, Mangal looked more and more scared but Dipu just stood and stared at her in amazement. He had never seen any human like her before. The Princess was tall and fair with a pretty face, dark eyes and dark hair that reached down to her knees. She was clad in silk and satin and priceless jewels sparkled round her neck and on her wrists and fingers.

The Princess' eyes suddenly fell on Dipu. "What a pretty donkey!" she exclaimed, patting Dipu on the head. "Why, donkey, I like you! I would like to have you as a pet. I want to take you home. I'll give you a bed of satin to sleep on. I'll feed you on the largest and juiciest carrots you've ever tasted. You won't have to work. You'll be my



friend, and take me for rides in the forest. Come on, pretty donkey, will you be mine?"

Dipu was struck dumb. He could only stare at the Princess in wonder. The Princess was impatient and short-tempered, and she now became angry.

"Come on, donkey, why don't you answer?" she asked sharply. She looked around and said, "Whose donkey is this? Tell me at once!"

Mangal stepped forward trembling from head to foot.

"Oh great Princess," he said, "this is my donkey."

"I wish to buy your donkey," said the Princess. "How much do you want for him? I'll pay well. I'll pay you in gold."

Mangal shook his head. "Good Princess, I cannot sell my donkey. He's my friend. I can't do without him."

"Cannot sell him?" shrieked the Princess. "How dare you refuse! I want to buy this donkey. You must sell him. I'll pay in gold. Gold, man! Do you understand? What can be better than gold?"

"I do understand, Princess!" nodded Mangal miserably. "But I cannot sell him. He's my friend. I can't sell my friend for all the gold in the world."

The Princess was very surprised to hear this. She had always thought that gold could buy anything. But here was a man refusing gold in favour of friendship. For a moment she was speechless; then she shouted, "You dare refuse? Do you know who you are talking to? I am the landlord's daughter. This village and everything in it belongs to my father, and to me. So I'll take this donkey, anyway. It's mine by right." And, turning to her guards, she ordered them to seize Dipu.

The guards immediately laid hold of Dipu and began to lead him away. The Princess walked off. Poor Mangal followed her, pleading for Dipu's release. Seeing him in

tears, Dipu whispered a hurried word of comfort. "Don't worry, Mangal!" he said. "I'll try to escape. Go quickly to Sonar Bagan. Meet my friends Papri, the monkey, and Hari, the grasshopper. Tell them what has happened. Tell them to inform the others, and ask them to help me. Tell them . . ."

He broke off, as by now he was out of earshot. Mangal watched till Dipu and his captors disappeared into the distance. Then, with a heavy heart, Mangal turned his steps towards Sonar Bagan, to do as his donkey friend had requested.

The Friends to the Rescue

The next morning the Princess decided to go for a ride in a nearby forest. She got onto Dipu's back and, accompanied by a guard walking behind, they set off. Throughout the ride the Princess tried to make friends with Dipu and talk to him, but Dipu was so sad at being parted from Mangal that he remained silent and gloomy.

By the time they reached the forest the Princess was annoyed with Dipu.

"When I decided to own you, I thought you were a special donkey," she said angrily. "Now I find you are just stupid. You're as stupid as that master of yours, the woodcutter. . . . Go on! Say something, or I'll punish you!"

In spite of the threat, Dipu remained silent.

"I've had enough," said the Princess, enraged. "Guard, stop this donkey and let me get off his back! I'll go for a walk in the forest. I'm sure I'll enjoy that more than riding on a silly, dumb donkey."

The guard made Dipu halt, and helped the Princess off his back.

"Tie him to a tree and leave him," ordered the Princess, and set off on her walk through the forest. The guard tied up Dipu and followed her to protect her.

As they were walking along a beautiful, little, purple

sunbird flew past and began to follow the Princess.

"Princess!" said the sunbird. "You are such a pretty, gentle girl. This forest is no place for you. This forest is dangerous. What are you doing here?"

"I'm going for a walk," said the Princess. "I am not afraid. I have my guard to protect me."

The sunbird shook her head. "I think both you and your guard are in danger," she said. "Since your guard doesn't know the way, both of you are likely to get into trouble."

"Trouble! What sort of trouble?" asked the Princess.

"Well, if you don't know the way," explained the sunbird, "you could fall into one of the pits dug by your father to trap elephants."

"Oh dear!" said the Princess. "We'll have to be careful, in that case."

"Don't worry!" said the sunbird. "I'll show you the way. I'll see that you come to no harm."

"That's very kind of you," said the Princess gratefully.

They hadn't gone far, however, when with a great crash, the Princess and her guard fell into one of the elephant pits.

"Help! Help!" the Princess screamed alarmed. "Guard, get me out! Get me out at once!"

But the guard looked at her helplessly. Ultimately she turned to the sunbird, who had settled on the branch of a nearby tree. "You promised to show us the way," she said accusingly, "but because of you we have fallen into this pit. . . . Now go at once and get help. Tell my father to send some guards to help us out of this pit."

But the sunbird shook her head. "You have been justly punished, Princess!" she said. "This was no accident. I led you into the pit deliberately. My name is Kular. You have been very unkind to my friend, Dipu, the donkey, who saved my life. You took him away from his friend Mangal,

and have made him a prisoner. You deserve to suffer."

"Yes, Princess," said another voice from the edge of the pit. "I am Motu, the elephant, and I am also a friend of Dipu. Your father dug this pit to trap elephants like me. You should have a taste of your own medicine."

"Yes! Yes!" said yet another voice from above. "You deserve to be punished. I am Papri, the monkey, and I am here to help my friend, Dipu. In fact, all Dipu's friends are here to help him."

The Princess looked up and saw a frog, a grasshopper, a rabbit, a parrot and a fox, gazing down at her. Of course they were Bula, Hari, Bunty, Payal and Chalu. They had come in response to Mangal's message to help Dipu.

The Princess was beside herself with rage. She stamped her foot and threw a tantrum.

"How dare you! How dare you!" she shrieked. "I'll have all of you punished. Wait till my father hears of this. He'll have all of you soundly whipped."

"Your father won't hear about this soon," Hari spoke up bravely. "We intend to leave you here to starve. By the time your father finds you, you'll surely be dead."

The Princess began to weep. "I don't want to starve," she sobbed. "I don't want to die. But . . ." And she looked at the faces staring down at her. At last her eyes fell on Chalu, the fox.

"Mr. Fox!" she said coaxingly. "You are known to be sly and cunning. No doubt you'll help me. If you get me out of here, I'll reward you. I'll pay in gold. Gold coins! Lots and lots of money!"

But, to her great amazement, Chalu shook his head.

"There are some things that all the gold in the world can't buy, dear lady," he answered. And he began to sing:

Money can buy you pretty things,
Bright red ribbons and diamond rings.

But money can't buy friends that are true,
Money can't stop you feeling blue.
Money can't take away pain from you,
And money can't buy you love.

"Yes! Yes! That silly woodcutter said something like that too!" said the Princess bitterly. Then she threatened again, "Just wait! I'll show you. When I get out of here, I'll have all of you punished. My father will see to that."

"Well then, get out of the pit as best you can," said Papri coldly. Then turning to the others she said, "Come, let's go and see how poor Dipu is." And off they went, leaving the Princess to her fate.

The Princess Learns a Lesson

The friends found Dipu tied to the tree, where the Princess had left him. Dipu was very happy to see his friends. Kular, who had come to live in Sonar Bagan was now part of the group. But Dipu was shocked to hear what they had done to the Princess.

"Now that was wrong," he said to them gently. "In Sonar Bagan no one is revengeful."

"In Sonar Bagan no one behaves like that," pointed out Hari. "The Princess deserves her punishment."

Dipu shook his head. "No! It's not right," he repeated. "Remember what Mr. Halley said about letting love grow. If we help the Princess perhaps she'll change. She'll become a better person. I think we should go back to the pit and rescue her."

"That's a fine idea indeed!" said Papri sarcastically. "Here we're so worried about you, and you are worrying about the Princess."

"Yes, we've come to take you back to your friend, the woodcutter," said Hari, "but you want to return to the pit and rescue that wicked Princess."

"Yes! That's what I really want to do," said Dipu sincerely. "If you are my friends, let's go and rescue the Princess."

"I suppose you are like this, because you're wearing

the star of love round your neck," said Bunty, sighing. "Very well then, I for one am willing to do as you want."

"So am I," said Payal.

"So am I," said Bula, and the rest also agreed. They returned to the pit, where they found the Princess weeping. She immediately complained about being hungry and thirsty.

"Hungry and thirsty!" said Dipu sympathetically. "Just a moment, we'll solve your problem." He ordered Papri to fetch some fruit for the Princess, and asked Motu to give her a drink of water.

Papri went and broke some apples from a tree, and threw them into the pit for the Princess and her guard. Motu filled his trunk at a nearby stream and, lowering it into the pit, gave the prisoners a drink.

After eating and drinking her fill, the Princess felt much better. She was grateful to the animals for their kindness, and ashamed of the way she had behaved.

"Thank you," she said. "I am sorry, Dipu, for what I did to you. But, if you get me out of here, I promise to try to be a nicer person."

"Do you really promise that?" asked Dipu, both surprised and pleased. "If you promise to be a nice person, we'll all be your friends."

"Yes, I promise," said the Princess sincerely. "I'm glad you'll all be my friends. I've never had any real friends, you know. That's probably why I've been so nasty."

"Don't worry, we'll get you out without delay," said Dipu, and immediately asked Motu to lift the Princess and her guard out of the pit.

Motu gently lifted the Princess out and set her free. She invited Dipu and the others home for tea. "I want to introduce you to my father. He'll be so pleased to meet you."

"That's very kind of you," said Dipu gratefully, "but I

must go and meet my friend, Mangal. He must be very worried about me."

"Yes, I know," said the Princess. "You'd better go and see your friend at once. But don't forget to come and visit me another day."

"We promise to come soon," answered the friends in chorus and, having wished the Princess goodbye, set off to see Mangal.

From that day, the Princess was a changed person. She was good and kind, and soon everyone in the village grew to love her.

Needless to say, Mangal and Sukhi were delighted to see Dipu again. Mangal threw his arms around Dipu's neck, and Sukhi again gave him a big kiss on the forehead. Dipu introduced his Sonar Bagan friends to the two. Sukhi prepared a grand feast, and they all sat down to eat.

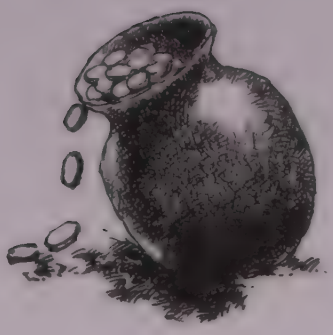
Later, the friends got up to return to Sonar Bagan.

"Are you coming back with us, Dipu?" Papri asked.

Dipu was about to say yes when he looked at Mangal's and Sukhi's faces. He could tell that they would be sad to lose him.

He said to his friends, "I wish to stay with Mangal and Sukhi for a while. They need me. But I will come to Sonar Bagan and visit you, I promise."

Mangal and Sukhi were delighted that Dipu had decided to stay on with them. His friends now said goodbye and left.



A Gift for Mangal

A few mornings later, Dipu woke early. The sun was shining brightly, and the sky was a clear blue. Dipu came out of his shed to find Mangal and Sukhi already awake.

"What! Awake so early?" Dipu remarked.

"Yes, we must set off early for Sonar Bagan to cut wood," explained Mangal. "Today is the Lakshmi Puja festival, and we have to return home early. Sukhi wants us to be back before sunset, and join her in the celebrations."

"The festival of Lakshmi Puja!" repeated Dipu, puzzled. "What's that?"

"Lakshmi is the goddess of wealth," Sukhi explained. "It is the custom to honour her with various offerings today. We also light little lamps outside the house to welcome the goddess. If she doesn't see the lamps burning, she won't enter our home, and we won't have good fortune."

"Well, that's rather funny," said Mangal smiling sadly. "Every year you worship Goddess Lakshmi. You do your puja, and make offerings to her. You light your lamps. Good fortune still continues to keep away from us. We are as poor as ever."

"I don't think you're quite right saying that," pointed

out Sukhi cheerfully. "We may have little money but we have love and happiness. That makes us rich. Those are things which money can't buy, you know."

"I suppose so," said Mangal, doubtfully. "Still, I wish we had enough money for food. It's such a pity we have to starve at times."

"Yes, that is a pity!" Sukhi admitted. "But don't be downhearted! Perhaps today Goddess Lakshmi will bring you luck. You may find a lot of wood to cut in Sonar Bagan. Go on! Don't delay! Just remember to be back before sunset, in time for Lakshmi Puja."

"All right," said Mangal, and he set off with Dipu.

The two walked briskly, and were in Sonar Bagan in a short time. Dipu was delighted to be back. He was looking forward to seeing his old friends.

Soon Papri came along. "Why, Dipu!" she cried. "How nice to see you! What brings you here?"

"I came with Mangal," said Dipu, and the two of them began to chat while Mangal looked around, for a tree that he could cut.

He returned shortly, shaking his head. "Not a dead tree to be found," he announced. "I'm afraid we'll have to return home empty-handed today."

"Why don't you cut down a green tree then?" suggested Dipu.

"What?" cried Mangal shocked. "If I cut down living trees, there would soon be no woods left. There'd be no shady branches for people to rest under, nowhere for birds or squirrels to build their nests. . . . No, I could never do that."

"That's very noble of you," said Papri admiringly. "You are a good man, Mangal. Trees belong to God, you know. That reminds me of a poem about trees. I hope I can remember the words. Would you like to hear it?"

"Yes, we certainly would," said Mangal and Dipu together, and Papri began:

I think that I shall never see
A poem lovely as a tree,
A tree that looks at God all day,
And lifts her leafy arms to pray;
A tree that may in summer wear
A nest of robins in her hair.
Poems are made by fools like me,
But only God can make a tree.

"What a beautiful poem!" cried Dipu.

"Yes, it's a beautiful poem," agreed Mangal. "If only all woodcutters would think that way our beautiful forests would be saved."

Just then Hari and Bunty came along. And Motu and Chalu. Payal, too. Only Bula was missing. Sleepy-head that he was, he was snoozing on his pink lily bed in the pond.

"I heard Papri," said Hari. "We came to see what had made her so happy. It's good to see you, Dipu and Mangal! How nice that you've come to Sonar Bagan so soon!"

Bunty, Motu, Payal and Chalu also welcomed Dipu and Mangal and they all began to chat.

* * * *

Mangal, however, was not happy. No wood meant that there would be no money that day. Sukhi would be upset, since it was the day of Lakshmi Puja. The others soon noticed that Mangal looked unhappy.

"You seem upset, Mangal!" remarked Chalu. "Is anything worrying you?"

"Mangal is worried because he hasn't been able to find a dead tree to cut," explained Dipu. "No wood means

no money to buy food. That will make Sukhi sad. You see, today is Lakshmi Puja, the festival of the goddess of wealth. Sukhi was hoping the goddess would shower her blessings on them and Mangal would find a lot of wood to sell. I suppose that's not to be." And he sighed.

"That's really sad," said Motu, and the others agreed. In fact, everyone became gloomy because of Mangal's bad luck.

At that moment, Kular, the sunbird, came along. She was feeling bright and happy, but soon she noticed how sad everyone was.

"Why! What's the matter?" she asked concerned.

Papri told her what the problem was. To everyone's amazement Kular chirped cheerfully, "That's no problem! All of you come with me. I'll show you a secret." And she began to lead the way.

Somewhat puzzled, the others followed her. Kular led the group to a cave hidden deep in the woods. When she reached the entrance, she announced, "Wait here a moment. Papri, come with me!" Followed by Papri, she went into the cave.

They came out in a few minutes, Papri carrying an old, earthen pot. She set it down before Mangal, as Kular explained, "Mangal, this is a gift for you. I found it yesterday, quite by accident. I've been wondering who to give it to. You are the most deserving person . . . Go on, open it Mangal!"

Hesitantly Mangal lifted the lid of the pot. The next moment he let out a cry of delight. "Gold! Gold!" he shouted. "The pot is full of gold coins. Kular, how can I thank you enough? Now Sukhi and I will be rich. We'll never be in want again. This gold is surely a gift from Goddess Lakshmi." He was about to lift up the pot when, suddenly, a thought struck him. "Kular, who does this

gold belong to?" he asked doubtfully.

"I don't really know," confessed Kular. "It must belong to someone, I guess."

"If it belongs to someone, I can't take it," Mangal said firmly. "I can't take what isn't mine. Suppose the person returns to claim his gold! He'll be very upset not to find it . . . . No! It would be wrong of me to take it. That would be stealing."

"I don't agree, Mangal," said Dipu. "Look at that pot! It's very, very old. It must have been lying in the cave for many, many years. Whoever owned the gold is no doubt dead. Go on take it! The gold is yours."

But Mangal refused to take it though they all tried to persuade him. So Kular had to return the pot to the cave, and Mangal and Dipu went home empty-handed.

* * * *

When they got back, they found Sukhi in good spirits. She had lit several small lamps, and was ready to offer prayers to Goddess Lakshmi. She wasn't too upset when Mangal told her he hadn't been able to cut any wood that day.

"Don't worry!" she said. "Perhaps you'll have better luck tomorrow. Come let's do our puja and honour Goddess Lakshmi."

But throughout the puja Mangal remained sad. He was even despondent later, when Sukhi served Dipu and him some sweetmeats which the Princess had sent, as a gift on that special day.

"You seem so unhappy that I am beginning to think you are worried about something more than not having found any wood today," said Sukhi. "What is it? I'm sure there's something on your mind."

At first Mangal wouldn't say what it was but Sukhi

continued to coax him, till finally he came out with the truth. He told her about the pot of gold which Kular had offered him, and that he had refused to take it.

"You refused to take a pot of gold coins?" cried Sukhi in amazement. "Oh, Mangal, why don't you realize that gold would solve all our problems? Mangal, what a fool you are! You're nothing but a fool."

"I'm not a fool," said Mangal stoutly. "How could I take the gold when it belongs to someone else? Suppose that person comes to claim it! I would be guilty of stealing. I would be a thief."

"No, you wouldn't," Sukhi argued. "The gold has probably been lying in the cave for years. Whoever it belonged to must be long since dead. Don't you realize that the gold is a gift to us from Goddess Lakshmi and like a fool you refused to take it?" She began to cry.

Mangal was very upset to see her in tears.

"All right! All right!" he said. "I'll take the gold, if I'm sure that the goddess wants me to have it."

"Suppose you find the gold at the foot of your bed when you wake up tomorrow morning!" said Dipu, who had been listening to this conversation. "Would you take it then, Mangal?"

"I certainly would," answered Mangal. "Then I would be sure it was a gift for me."

"I see!" said Dipu, his eyes shining.

All's Well that Ends Well

Later that night, when Mangal and Sukhi had gone to bed, Dipu made the long journey back to Sonar Bagan in secret. When he got there, he quickly woke up all his friends—all, except Motu, who was away, spending the night with friends. Dipu told the gang about Mangal's condition for accepting the gold.

"In that case we must get the pot of gold, and put it at the foot of Mangal's bed tonight," said Papri. "When he wakes up in the morning, he'll find the pot, and think that Goddess Lakshmi has put it there for him. That will solve the problem."

"We must find Kular at once," said Hari. "Only she knows where the cave is."

They set off in search of Kular. They found her asleep in a peepal tree. Kular came immediately in response to their call.

"A very good idea!" she said, when they had finished speaking. "But I must tell you that we have a problem. When we were offering Mangal the gold, we didn't know that we were overheard. Two robbers, Daku and Baku, were listening to us. They are planning to steal the gold. They've been keeping watch on the cave and are waiting for a chance to take the pot. If we go there just now they'll see us. They'll attack us and snatch the pot—we are all

rather small, I'm afraid. What a pity Motu isn't here! He would have been able to frighten the two robbers away."

"Oh dear! That's a problem," said Hari. "What will we do?"

Kular was silent for a while, busy thinking. Then she said excitedly, "I have an idea. I'll ask my new friend, Kum Kum, the snake, to help us . . . . Come on! Let's go and find her." And away they went.

Kum Kum was asleep in her hole under some bushes. The friends woke her up. She immediately agreed to help.

"Yes, I can frighten the robbers away," she said. "I also happen to know the cave, and I know about the pot of gold, too. My mother told me about it. She said that, long, long ago, the gold belonged to a very miserly king who never spent a penny. He hid the gold in the cave, so that his people couldn't get it, even after his death. The king would come secretly every day to look at the gold. One day, near the cave, Goddess Lakshmi appeared before him. She cursed him for being so miserly, and took away the pot. The king tried to find it, but couldn't. He was very upset, and died a most unhappy man. Later, Goddess Lakshmi showed my great, great grandmother the pot of gold and asked her to guard it carefully. The goddess said she would give the pot to the right person some day. My great, great grandmother looked after the pot till her death. The pot has remained in the cave since then."

"Well, I'm now positive that Goddess Lakshmi wants Mangal to have the gold," said Dipu.

"Yes, I'm sure, too," said Kular. "That's how I came across it yesterday. Come let's go to the cave."

They quickly made their way to the cave. When they got there, they all hid amongst the trees except for Kum Kum who slipped into the cave quietly. She went to the

pot and curled up inside it, right on top of the gold.

The two robbers were hiding amongst the bushes. As soon as the moon disappeared behind some clouds and it became pitch dark, they entered the cave furtively. They came out with the pot and set it down on the ground.

"We'll soon be rich," said Daku, excitedly.

"Yes," agreed Baku, equally excited. "Come on let's share the gold: half for you and half for me."

"No," said Daku firmly. "After all, it was I who overheard the conversation and told you of this fortune. I should get two-thirds, you one-third."

Baku wouldn't agree. The two soon came to blows. As they were fighting they knocked over the pot. Instead of gold, out came Kum Kum. She raised her head and hissed loudly, ready to strike.

"A snake! A snake!" shrieked Daku. "There's no gold in that pot!"

"It's all your fault," screamed Baku. "You lied to me!" And with a cry of terror, he turned and bolted, promptly followed by Daku.

* * * *

The friends came out of hiding. They could hardly hold back their laughter. They thanked Kum Kum warmly for her help.

Dipu, too, thanked everyone for their help and, then set off for Mangal's village, carrying the pot of gold on his back. When he reached, he placed the pot at the foot of Mangal's bed, and slipped off to his shed to sleep for the rest of the night.

When Mangal rose the next morning and saw the pot of gold he could not believe his eyes. He immediately called Sukhi. "See!" he said excitedly. "Now I know that Goddess Lakshmi wants us to have this gold. She has put

it here for us. Sukhi, how lucky we are! Our problems are over."

"Yes, our problems are over!" agreed Sukhi, equally excited, not quite able to believe their good fortune. "You won't have to work any more. You won't have to cut wood any more."

"Yes," said Mangal happily. "But I think we should share our good fortune with others in the village. We have enough gold—more than enough. It would be a good idea to give some to everyone. What do you say?"

"I agree," said Sukhi readily. "But we won't need to give the Princess any because her father is rich."

All the poor villagers received a share of the fortune and there was great rejoicing in the village.

When the excitement had died down Dipu, who had been observing everything decided to speak one morning.

"Mangal," he said, "now you don't need me any more to carry wood for you. I think it's time I returned to Sonar Bagan. I've had enough adventure for the present. I would like to have a rest."

"Well, if that's what you want, Dipu," said Mangal. "But I'll be sorry to lose you."

"You won't be losing me," said Dipu happily. "I'll come and visit you often and you must come to Sonar Bagan to see us."

"I will certainly do so," replied Mangal warmly. "I can't possibly forget all of you."

On a bright sunny morning, Dipu wished Mangal and Sukhi goodbye, and set out merrily for Sonar Bagan. He was looking forward to being with his friends again. "Papri was right," he said to himself as he trotted along. "Though I've enjoyed being in the great wide world of men, I think the best place for me is Sonar Bagan. That's where I really belong."

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